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Improving Nigerian Border Security-A Comprehensive Approach

by

James. H. Adams

COL, USA

A paper submitted to the faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature\_\_\_\_\_

2 November 2012

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## **Abstract**

Nigeria's porous border situation presents a security problem demanding a coordinated national and multilateral approach to address the issue effectively. Smuggling, narcotics trafficking, illegal immigration, movement of arms and ammunition, human trafficking, and insurgent movements offer some of the major challenges to domestic and regional security. A variety of circumstances and factors contribute to Nigeria's systemically futile efforts to accomplish adequate border operations. The federal government possesses abundant border policy and laws. However, it does not effectively coordinate the efforts of the various agencies that often possess overlapping lines of jurisdiction and authorities. The result is an inconsistent and inequitable effort to enforce laws and allows widespread violations to thrive. Deficiencies and shortages in personnel, equipment, facilities, and training, combined with Nigeria's prevalent penchant for graft and corruption complicates the problem even further. This paper explores some of the major negative influences on border security operations. It seeks to offer a framework and model the Nigerian government and its neighbors might use to begin to address the problem.

## Introduction

*“The purpose of Homeland Defense is to protect against and mitigate the impact of incursions or attacks on sovereign territory, the domestic population, and defense of critical infrastructure.”*<sup>1</sup>

The government of Nigeria struggles to achieve unity of effort amongst different federal and state organizations to mitigate threats and effectively address its porous border situation. Nigeria cannot pursue a national integrated security effort due to a lack of communication and cooperation between its security and law enforcement agencies, and its immediate neighbors.<sup>2 2</sup> Multiple challenges in the Nigerian border situation present the federal government much angst over inefficient border security operations. A multitude of difficult problems requires an approach that no single government agency can effectively address alone. Different border regions present varying types of threats. Depending on the area, the activity includes illegal immigration, human trafficking, narcotics movement, arms smuggling, and petroleum product smuggling to name some of the most prominent. Not only are these illicit activities a threat to stability and internal security to Nigeria, but they pose a regional and global impact as well.<sup>3</sup> All the while, a deep culture of graft, corruption, greed, and parochial interests probably presents the most formidable challenge to Nigeria’s ability to improve its situation.

These persistent circumstances present Nigeria with a complex problem that requires a systemic, consistent, and coordinated approach orchestrated at the national level in concert with its immediate neighbors. This problem warrants the attention and dedicated resources commensurate with a sustained operational level

campaign in defense of its homeland. In terms of homeland defense, multiple threats, overlapping jurisdictions between different agencies, presence of private sector businesses, and partnerships with neighboring states produce a complex environment that demands synchronized interagency and multinational operations.<sup>4</sup> This paper explores some of the greatest influences contributing to the poor border situation. It illustrates why the unique nature of each situation requires solutions designed to address each unique problem. The government of Nigeria should pursue a national level program that coordinates the efforts of multiple government agencies, security forces, and regional partners to enhance border security operations and reduce threats to stability.

### **The Counterargument**

Nigeria believes it can reduce illicit border activity and criminality if it focuses on developing infrastructure and economic conditions in the border communities. In 2003, the National Boundary Commission embarked on the Border Community Development program in an effort to address what they saw as one of the primary causes of border issues. Based on the Commission's recommendation, the federal government passed the Border Communities Development Agency Act in 2003. The act establishes the Border Communities Development Agency and empowers it to execute the development of Nigeria's extensive border areas in collaboration with the National Boundary Commission. The composition reflects the attempt at a whole of government approach by including representatives from the Ministries of Justice, Foreign Affairs, Transportation, Interior, Finance, Defense, Agriculture and Water Resources, Education, Power, Science and Technology, Environment, Police Affairs

and National Planning. The Agency's mission is to work with state border commission representatives from Nigeria's 21 border states. The charter is to develop and improve areas with poor or non-existent social infrastructure.<sup>5</sup> The Boundary Commission was hopeful development efforts would ease pressure on economic activities in these areas, reduce criminal activity and lead to better border conditions. Unfortunately, the effort is not delivering the desired effect and has not curtailed or lessened illegal activities along the porous borders to the degree desired.<sup>6</sup>

Hypothetically, the program could be successful and establish secure areas along the borders conducive to promoting improvements in trade and legitimate economic activity. A fallacy in this approach is the apparent lack of integrated security operations tied to the economic incentives of community development. The program should consist of both incentives and disincentives. Without enforced security measures, criminals and nefarious activities will continue to seek alternate means and methods to circumvent border forces and continue illicit operations as usual. The lack or absence of integrated security efforts also provides criminal, smuggling and other illicit networks with new targets of invigorated revenue.

### **Geographic Border Situation and Characteristics**

Nigeria's largest geographic borders with Cameroon, Niger, and Benin create by its greatest land challenges. Almost 4,000 kilometers of border exist between the three countries. 1,475 official border sites and another estimated almost 2,000 unofficial sites cross Nigeria's border areas.<sup>7</sup> Underdeveloped border areas and austere conditions also complicate security efforts. In many cases, the border areas

lack facilities, adequate roads, and equipment. Law enforcement agents are often ill equipped and outnumbered. Trespassers are familiar with the local terrain around illegal crossing points and easily traverse the border undetected.<sup>8</sup> These combined characteristics alone point to the need to use as many forces and organizations as possible to mitigate resource shortages and address the immensity of the task. However, Nigeria's inextricable links to its neighbors compound the immense challenge in policies that promote free movement.

### **Good Neighbor Policy**

The Good Neighbor Policy presents a unique challenge to Nigeria's fluid border situation. Aside from occasional border incidents, Nigeria seeks to maintain cordial relations with all its immediate neighbors. It also strives to have good relations with other countries in the West African sub region and has bilateral agreements with most of them. Nigeria's professed guiding principle is one of neighborliness and friendship. The intent is to help resolve conflicts in the African sub region. The second aspect Nigeria is trying to make its neighbors "safe" friends to help reinforce boundary claims and protect human rights of Nigerian citizens who are migrant workers and to stabilize relations with its immediate neighboring countries.<sup>9</sup>

Cultural considerations are a prime consideration influencing this policy. Professor Anthony I. Asiwaju posits in his book, *Artificial Boundaries*, that African boundaries are an artificial remnant from European colonization of Germany, Britain, France, and Portugal. Arbitrarily imposed colonial boundaries separated age old social cultural groups into political administrations. Poorly defined boundaries or



boundaries not demarcated added additional complexity to the problem. People simply did not pay attention to the boundaries or did not know when they crossed them.<sup>10</sup> Boundary demarcation is inconsistent despite efforts to mark them over the years. Rudimentary and nonpermanent items, such as a log on the ground, often mark the border. The overall effect is a historical and cultural foundation directly contributing to Nigeria's porous border situation. Social and economic ties magnify the porosity situation through natural movement across boundaries. Nigeria has tried to accommodate the essence of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic influences in border operations. However, that undertaking presents Nigeria with a contradiction to effective security operations.

### **Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)**

Good intentions cloak Nigeria's purpose and role as an ECOWAS member. The ECOWAS Protocol of 1979 negotiated free movement of people between borders, and the right to establish residence and business. Nigeria hails the Protocol as a success in laying the foundation for the emergence of borderless communities of people. Major decisions from the Protocol include abolishing residence permits for ECOWAS citizens, issuing ECOWAS travel certificates, adopting a single ECOWAS passport, the eventual introduction of a multi- country visa. The result is a situation allowing ECOWAS citizens to travel between countries with minimal interruption.<sup>11</sup> The Protocol design promotes free movement and improved economic opportunity between the sub region's members. Ibn Chambas, former ECOWAS Executive Secretary, captured the essence of avoiding isolationism as he stated "our goal of achieving a borderless West Africa can only be

realized if our peoples are able to freely move about in West Africa as our forefathers did before colonialism brought about the existing boundaries. Free movement will help us increase trade amongst West African states. Increased trade means that more goods and services will be produced, increased production means, in turn, increased job creation and opportunities to fight poverty and increase wealth for our people.”<sup>12</sup>

Although the intent’s overarching design is for positive purposes, the unintended consequence of a borderless ECOWAS lends a hand in enhancing unwanted circumstances. The ECOWAS free movement policies contribute to conditions conducive to nefarious, illegal, and harmful activities. Those activities ironically add to the conundrum allowing harmful forces to flourish alongside the legitimate goals intended by the 1979 Protocol. This situation adds to competition and confusion among the agencies responsible for border security.

### **Border Operations: Who is in Charge of the Borders?**

In an effort to work boundary management issues, in July 1988 the Babangida Administration set up a nine-member National Boundaries Commission under the chief of General Staff. The commission coordinates the activities of all agencies involved in internal and international borders. The organization has the authority to investigate and resolve boundary problems or issues between Nigeria and its neighbors, and internally between its states. The president also announced a five-year plan to demarcate and map all of its borders. The government also planned to establish joint boundary commissions with all of its neighbors.<sup>13</sup> However, the effort is not as effective as envisioned. The evidence highlighted below

characterizes negative aspects and enduring challenges to border security operations.

### **Facilities, Conditions, and Infrastructure**

The Nigerian Ministry of Interior, specifically the Customs Office, executes primacy in securing Nigeria's borders. Like many of the other Nigerian government organizations, insufficient resources and training impair its operations. Corruption is also a large issue among security forces, especially when border officials are so easily tempted and become part of the problem in the process.<sup>14</sup> According to the account of one smuggler, a normal procedure is to settle customs fees prior to departing across the border. Smugglers depart the border with pre-arranged payments. Security agencies and officials collect at every checkpoint.<sup>15</sup> Border agents always operate under mixed sets of circumstances. The nature of the security environment in the border areas influences the degree to which the agents uphold and enforce the laws. Security agencies often endure the stress of understaffed organizations, poor vehicles, bad equipment, substandard office and living space, and supply and money shortages.<sup>16</sup>

Customs officials complain regularly about the operating conditions and describe the nature of the problems plaguing the border forces. Security levels often dictate how fervently officials enforce the law. Armed smugglers cross the border by the hundreds. The smugglers do not hesitate to use force if confronted, and that includes open conflict with law enforcement officials. Smugglers are known to beat agents and some agents have lost their lives. Smugglers overwhelm agents because they know the terrain better than the security forces and use illegal routes.

The smugglers consider it their right to use any route they choose and have an extremely low threshold for anyone attempting to interdict them.<sup>17</sup> Outnumbered border forces are a stark fact that supports the integrated, multi-agency approach. A combined effort of forces could help offset the disadvantage of a lack of human capital and resources in the most hotly contested areas.

Other problems consistently plague border security agents. In particular, low morale due to adverse conditions frustrates the government's ability to operate effectively. Many agents see the situation as a matter of survival for them and their families' livelihood. In this sense, agents always fear injury or death. The agents realize there are no benefits for their families if they lose their life in the line of duty. The agents commonly lament about wages and lack of compensation or hazardous duty pay in such a dangerous job. The lack of proper equipment, vehicles, communications, and sometimes arms and ammunition serves to fuel the decline in morale on the front. As a result, agents often develop a survival attitude and carve a niche in the system to augment their own existence.<sup>18</sup> In general, the conditions on the border are volatile and violent outbreaks occur between border officials and criminals, as well as between criminals and local populace. This aspect of the complex border situation spawns another characteristic of Nigeria's approach to the problem in terms of a capability to respond and react effectively.

### **Ad Hoc Operations**

Nigeria often uses military forces to respond to significant issues in an ad hoc manner. Although the government has been making improvements in coordinating efforts between customs, immigration, police, and military forces they are not

consistent. As an example, concerns over the latest Boko Haram activity triggered the latest Nigerian reaction of this type. In August 2012, killings and terrorist bombings prompted the federal government to add the Nigerian Air Force to the array of security organizations working border issues. Up to this point, air patrols in support of border security were not an Air Force mission. However, the Air Force accepted it without hesitation and promised to figure it out.<sup>19</sup> This latest action underscores the need for law and security force agencies to forge deeper collaboration, share resources, and pursue a unified effort working on a universally understood policy. In this case, security operations involving Boko Haram require efforts on both sides of Nigeria's borders to integrate air and ground capabilities supporting intelligence and interdiction operations.

### **Neighbor Relations: The Benin Situation**

The Benin-Nigeria border offers complexities which require a multi-faceted approach. This section highlights some of the larger issues in framing the context of the problem. Linguistic and ethnic commonalities drive intimate cross border interaction. These characteristics, ECOWAS, and the Good Neighbor Policy encourage natural, economic ties and generate business between the two countries.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, this close relationship contributes to the conditions conducive to illicit activity and trade.

Private individuals conduct a large amount of the business and Nigeria-Benin smuggling occurs on a monumental scale. Petroleum products, stolen vehicles, and narcotics are some of the most prevalent items moved across the border on a routine basis.<sup>21</sup> Internationally reputed criminals compound the problem by also trafficking people, drugs, ammunition, arms, textiles, agricultural products and

possible terrorists to name a few.<sup>22</sup> Globalization is also worsening the effects of trans border crime. The Benin Republic is a transit point for dumping Asian goods on the Nigerian economy. This activity complicates the illegal business problem and adds additional pressure to the virility of Nigerian economy.<sup>23</sup>

The issues above indicate a smuggling situation thriving under the veil of social and cultural ties. Government policies and addressing socio-economic realities have to be part of the solution processes. Improvements in collaboration and co-operation of border security officials also have to be made. Improvements are critical if there is any hope of attempting to rectify the situation.<sup>24</sup> In this case, an integrated approach with Benin could include regional or state operations weighted with customs, counter narcotics, and air forces to cover gaps in the border and illegal crossing points.

### **The Cameroon Dynamic**

Nigeria and Cameroon also have border areas sharing close ethnic, cultural, and linguistic traits. In general terms, cross border migration is more trouble free for security officials. This situation helps provide a foundation for friendlier relations between the two. Although Nigeria and Cameroon are not without confrontation in their history. The most notable dispute between the two countries occurred over boundaries in the oil rich Bakassi peninsula.<sup>25</sup> Deadly border clashes finally forced the issue as the two countries could not resolve the dispute. The case went to the International Court of Justice in 2002. The International Court of Justice ceded the Bakassi Peninsula to Cameroon. The ruling directed Nigeria to relinquish control within two years while resolving repatriation issues.<sup>26</sup> In an ironic

twist, the ruling itself created additional repatriation issues. Bakassi nationals preferring to be Nigerians resented the decision. The issue created a situation requiring the borders between the two countries remain under close security and surveillance against all forms of trafficking and smuggling. Tight scrutiny remains the state of that border area today.<sup>27</sup> Nigeria laments the lack of an ability to resolve the dispute without the International Court of Justice's intervention. The Bakassi incident and ruling serves to highlight the necessity of a larger effort to organize and execute bilateral operations between Nigeria and her neighbors. The massive and varied trans-border issues require cooperative measures from all parties involved. Further, Nigeria recognizes the "Good Neighbor Policy" is no substitute for a serious policy and campaign to address the seriousness and shortcomings of its current operations.<sup>28</sup> The Bakassi circumstances differ from problems with Nigeria's other neighbors. If anything, this example underscores the need for the Nigerian government to move forward and promote consistent regional cooperation.

## **Niger**

The Nigeria-Niger border presents a different set of contentious problems. The border is over 150 kilometers and cuts across one of the densely populated areas of the southern Niger Republic. History, culture, and language are also common in this region. Although smuggling and trafficking occurs between the two countries, the porous border situation affords a more sinister threat to security. Movement of arms and ammunition and infiltration by Muslim fundamentalists concern these countries on a growing basis. The borders are under close surveillance in an attempt to repair the situation and impede movement.<sup>29</sup> Both

countries are increasingly concerned with the spread of terrorist activities tied to Boko Haram. Both Niger and Cameroon share borders with northern Nigerian states and Boko Haram has the potential to increase its influence in these areas. More so than Cameroon, Niger's weak government, economic challenges, and social disparity issues identify it as fertile ground for terrorist activity. Niger's security situation is already fragile. The spread of Boko Haram into Niger would further serve to upset the balance of security in the region.<sup>30</sup> The border situation with Niger offers another example where a cooperative regional effort could offer dividends. The militant Boko Haram aspect makes these border regions natural candidates for heavy Army, Air Force, and combined operations.

### **Potential Solution**

As previously noted, Nigeria has organizations, policy, and laws in place addressing border security. The problem lies in enforcing laws and policy in a fair and consistent manner. As a solution, an integrated approach under the direction of one central organization can offer the unity effort through pooling of a variety of security forces and resources to meet such a large challenge. The United States offers an example of how Nigeria might approach this problem. A variety of threats and challenges confront the United States including narcotics trafficking, illegal immigration, and smuggling. The United States uses homeland defense as one of the ways to counter those threats. In doing so, there is a mechanism to deconflict overlapping roles and authorities and is focused achieve positive results.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, a multitude of similar, interrelated threats confront Nigeria and its neighbors. These threats require coordinated procedures and synchronized efforts among a vast array



of civil and military organizations. A homeland defense model could provide Nigeria a starting point to improve its operation procedures.

### **Model / Example**

The Government of Nigeria should adopt a modified construct based on capabilities and threats. The model should include regional partners to address transnational threats. The U.S. NORTHCOM Joint Task Force-North provides a model to design an operational framework. As Joint Task Force-North is the U.S. Department of Defense organization tasked to support the nation's federal law enforcement agencies, Nigeria could form a similar security organization. The organization should be empowered to fulfill the same critical role of working with civil authorities in support of Nigeria's homeland defense. At the national level, Nigeria's security needs address many of the same issues Joint Task Force-North supports in its role to civil law enforcement authority. That role specifically entails "identifying and interdicting suspected transnational threats ...and activities that involve international terrorism, narco- trafficking, alien smuggling ... that threaten the national security of the United States."<sup>32</sup>

The Nigerian federal government should design the organization to address and counter distinctive threats in each of the border areas with Benin, Niger, and Cameroon. The organization should assign sub areas of responsibility for agencies and organizations on a permanent basis. The organization should be a composite of federal agencies, law enforcement, military services, other government organizations as necessary and multi- national partners. The sub-organizations should operate out of joint and combined coordination centers based on either

regional or state defined boundaries. The complex nature of Nigeria's porous border situation clearly demands interagency mission integration towards unity of effort and unity of purpose to overcome the myriad of challenges presented by a border situation that challenges the dispersed efforts to control it.

### **Opportunity for Phase 0 Operations for U.S. AFRICA Command (AFRICOM)**

In keeping with the provisions of Military Engagement and Security Cooperation, this situation provides AFRICOM an opportunity to pursue meaningful efforts with Nigeria, its neighbors, and the African Union. This is a venue for AFRICOM to work with the Department of State, and pursue Theater Security Cooperation goals to expand defense relationships, promote regional stability, develop security capabilities amongst allies, and improve the potential for access to the host nation and sub-African region in time of need. Clearly, Nigeria and the sub-African region stand to benefit from a cooperation strategy providing a framework that fosters cooperative security activities and development.<sup>33</sup>

### **Professionalize and Train**

This aspect addresses one of the most prolific challenges the Nigerian government faces in performing civic or military action. An integrated multinational approach affords multiple Nigerian forces and agencies opportunities to train and professionalize law enforcement organizations and military forces. Developmental actions enhance a host government's willingness and ability to care for its people.<sup>34</sup> Nigerian civil defense and security forces are often the culprits of illegal and criminal acts and its track record on human rights abuses is abysmal. If graft and corruption are common traits of the Nigerian agencies and officials in general, then the border

areas magnify it due to austere conditions and distances away from headquarters and supervision.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion

*“On 22 January, Minister of Interior Comrade Abba Moro, announced plans for better border control infrastructure around the country. He reportedly said that about 1,475 “official” borders and 1,975 “unofficial” borders had been identified. He indicated that the priority would be to improve security at “official” borders, and then focus on “irregular” borders – with the aim of completing the full project by 2015.”<sup>36</sup>*

The Nigerian border situation presents the government with an extremely complicated problem continuing to intensify the internal and external governance and security challenges plaguing the country today. Given Nigeria’s prominent role in sub-Sahara Africa it is their responsibility to take the lead in formulating a national and regional approach to stem the destabilizing impact of the porous border situation that degrades the ability to service the needs of its population, as well as that of its neighbors. This paper did not explore the magnitude and persistence of many of the internal problems confronting the different agencies, ministries and organizations in the Nigerian government, but rather posed a potential way ahead assuming many internal conflicts and contradictions might be resolved or managed.

In any case, the level of corruption, greed, and patronage permeating the Nigerian government likely presents the ultimate challenge facing any measure of true reform to border security operations. A true commitment in this area requires Nigeria to have the will to change endemic practices that organizations and officials use to pursue parochial interests and gain. If the Nigerians are able to sincerely commit to this effort, AFRICOM, the African Union or other intergovernmental

organizations could participate in this campaign and provide much needed monitoring and oversight to border security operations.

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